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ABSTRACT

The author suggests that "today's educational movement is toward humanism, relevance, and individualization." The rationale for these remarks is discussed in sections on first language acquisition models, unstructured learning, trial and error learning, meaning in communication, language models, learning grammar, "perfect" pronunciation, the need to individualize, and the psychologist's and sociologist's viewpoint. The importance of social interaction through peer teaching is emphasized as a means of developing natural and unstructured communication in the classroom. (RL)

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INDIVIDUALIZED OR COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Keynote address delivered to
Modern and Classical Language Association of Southern
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INDIVIDUALIZED OR COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Contradiction of the Title:

Little learning is truly individual or accomplished by one person. Most learning is the result of an interaction between two or more persons. We do learn through individual interaction with our environment; but particularly in language learning, most of our learnings come from a social interaction with other people.

In first language learning children learn the code through a number of different types of social interactions. A baby has one central person to react to and to learn from - his mother. And through constant and frequent contact, the baby and later the child takes on the language system of its mother and other family members.

As the child grows, the number of persons it comes in contact with increases, and so do opportunities for language development.

1. Playmates give the child continuous feedback. Many parents will attest to the fact that children pick up many forms on the playground they certainly never heard of at home.

2. Relatives and neighbors also serve as language models.

3. People in the extended community - school pals, gangs, persons on radio and television - also serve as models.

The result being that the first language learner has many models for language learning. More important, perhaps, is the fact that the first language learner also has many opportunities for practice - many different kinds of practice.

FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION MODES

First language skills are learned in a tremendous variety of ways. Most language learning - as is true of all learning - takes place outside the classroom. That is why ESL programs tend to be successful, sometimes in spite of themselves, because of that big language laboratory outside the classroom.

> I remember a story an associate of mine told me about an ESL Program. They were highly pleased with what they were doing because of the rapid progress of the children. Children were monolingual Spanish speakers; but once in the program they rapidly learned to speak English. The program director, being a conscientious sort, started investigating to discover the reasons for success - in so doing she asked 3 questions: Does anyone in your family speak English? ---No! Do you have a TV set? ---Yes! Which programs do you watch? --- "Los programas americanos porque son mejores." And that "Language laboratory" was probably on from 3 to 8 hours a day.

Unstructured Learning

Another important quality of first language learning is that it is self-directed. Mothers and Fathers don't give pattern drills, exercises, or provide systematic re-entry of vocabulary items; the child directs his own learning of language for the most part.

Trial and Error Learning

Perhaps trial and error learning is the most important aspect of first language acquisition. The learner is constantly making up words, phrases, and sentences; and consciously or unconsciously trying out these for correctness and effectiveness of communication.

Meaning and Communication

Actually correctness and effectiveness of communication should be reversed because the main criterion for a first language learner is whether or not what he says gets him what he wants. If a child says "cookie-cookie" when she toddles into the kitchen, any self-respecting-doting parent will reward that performance with a Lorna Doone or a Hostess Twinkie.

As long as the meaning is communicated, it matters little whether the child uses a complete phrase unless the complete sentence would get him 2 cookies.

Consideration of such unstructured learning leads to the suggestion that we consider first language acquisition as a model for second language teaching and learning. I believe there are implications in the process of natural language acquisition for teaching and learning that will help youngsters learn foreign languages.

In addition, the current emphasis on individualized instruction makes it essential that we find language instruction techniques that are oriented to one student's learning a language - and the way first language is learned appears to be a useful model for subsequent language learning.

Language Models

A child learning his first language has many models from which to learn. Of course, most foreign language teachers work long and hard at providing their students with a variety of language models. Usually they are on tape recordings--But remember that most tape recordings are like printed language, that is, it is perfect and polished without the natural errors that even well-educated speakers make--those were all left on the editing room floor.

And so, though foreign language students may have a number of models, they have only one variety of language--the polished speech of tape recordings, and the grammatically and phonetically perfect language of the teacher and textbook.

That's not totally true because occasionally the student has the opportunity to listen to another student perform. But, the social interaction of the classroom is normally between the teacher and the students or student--not between peers, which of course is the most frequent form of communication and learning among children of school age. Teenagers even develop their own dialect so that adults will understand them even less. And they change the code frequently so that if you have one teenager in the house, and finally learn to understand at least a part of the jargon he speaks, by the time the next child reaches the teens, the jargon is completely different and you have to start learning all over again.

Learning Grammar

Foreign language teachers also usually insist that students answer in complete sentences--the rationale being it gives the student more opportunity for practice. But that rule also imposes a very real barrier and an unnatural condition, because we don't always speak in complete sentences. We write in complete sentences, and we lecture in complete sentences--because lectures are usually written. But we speak in single words, phrases, and complete sentences.

Another practice that is the norm in foreign language classes is to insist that students speak grammatically correct sentences each time they respond. Many of you would agree that a good deal of time is spent in correcting those mistakes students persist in making.

Perfect Pronunciation

The tape recorder was a great boom to language instruction; and with its introduction to the classroom came the possibility of providing native speakers as models for pronunciation. In some cases, as a result of pronunciation practice in the language laboratory, the students' pronunciation is practically flawless before he or she can engage in a simple exchange of ideas.

These demands are not ones that the first language learner has to meet. In fact, parents often dote upon and encourage children's infantile speech patterns and pronunciations. Our oldest child who is now 11 developed the habit as a toddler of changing the endings of certain words. An elephant became an elefanut, a pelican became a pelikanut, a deodorant became a deodernut.

Second language learner pronunciation errors and errors of form and structure are usually not doted upon--nor should they be--but perhaps there is a stage in second language learning where pronunciation is less relevant than the ability to communicate with an imperfect but meaningful word or phrase.

Now, all of this does not mean that concern for pronunciation of grammar or correct use of forms should be ignored or eliminated. Rather, what it means is a rearrangement of priorities--and at the top of the list is natural communication between 2 or more people.

The component parts of language--such as pronunciation, grammar, etc., all contribute to the effectiveness of the interchange, but if a student doesn't first have understanding and meaning of the phrases used in practice, then there is little reason to worry about whether the bilabial stop in the medial position is overly plosive. If this sounds like a criticism of linguistic science and its contributions to language teaching, it is not. Linguists and language teaching specialists have developed some tremendous tools to work with in language teaching.

And language teaching today is a far improved art than it was 15 or so years ago--when that first Sputnik appeared in the skies.

What it does suggest is that we consider foreign language methodologies in light of what we know about natural language learning.

For example, pattern drills and their use; basically pattern drills are designed to develop through repeated practice an automatic response or competence in the student. But the drills and practice associated with them often result in language with little or no meaning. Not that drills are nonsense sentences, although some are pretty far-fetched, but they are bits of language lifted out of context-almost like a jig-saw puzzle piece that, when lying to the side of the puzzle, looks as though it could never fit, but when placed next to other pieces already in the puzzle, falls in place.

We need context and setting to give language meaning, and we need interaction between people to establish that context and meaning. Classroom teaching that attempts to simplify and put language learning in some pre-determined order, may inadvertantly eliminate the contextual and situational cues that help us understand, remember and learn. In addition, language practices that are so refined as to not have one wasted word, eliminate a very important element of natural language--the quality of redundancy. When you listen to a person's speech, you will find it full of redundancies--because in natural language, they help us understand what is being said; they fill in gaps caused by the listener not hearing each and every word the speaker is sending.

But in language practice in the classroom, simplification and desire for economy of time often eliminates redundancies and for some student whose mind wandered for a minute, meaning is lost. He has lost the context, the meaning and the value of the practice.

Let me not imply that our need is to eliminate pattern practice or dialogues, or even fill-in sentences for that matter. But we do need to bring more humanism into language teaching. We need to bring more natural language learning into the classroom and the second language learning process. Materials and classes that are written and conducted with great care so as not to allow the learner to make natural errors or mistakes in language may well be denying the student an important, if not essential, opportunity for learning.

This means the following ideas should be incorporated into second language teaching:

1. Allow the learner trial and error learning.

2. Emphasize perception or understanding of pattern rather than intensive drill.

3. Introduce self-directed learning activities.

4. Provide opportunities for the use of partial responses as a stage in second language learning.

5. Perhaps most important, provide the opportunity for social interaction and language exchange between students in the second language classroom, so that students can learn from one another; in other words, peer teach.

It is interesting that today's movement toward individualization is regarded as an innovation. Of course, in America, we are an innovation-oriented society--everything is new or new improved.

Peer teaching, of course, is not a new concept. The one-room schoolhouse could not have operated without youngsters helping each other within and across age and grade levels. What was institutionalized because of necessity--a shortage of teachers and facilities during the time of the Westward movement--is being rediscovered and hailed as an innovation called the ungraded elementary school. What parents have long known--that siblings often do a better job than parents of teaching younger children--is now being explained by psychologists and sociologists to support the concept of peer teaching.

One of the consequences of the rapid professionalization of education is that some of the valuable folk lore and common practices have been lost along the way. Learning theory and subject matter emphasis have been paramount in teacher preparation for the last decade. There has been a corresponding distrust of the intuitive, artistic approach to teaching in favor of the scientific, analytic approach. As with so much else in education, however, we are coming full circle. The common practice of years ago is being 'discovered' and validated by means of the scientific approach of today. Nowhere is this tendency more evident than in the spontaneous movement all across the land toward peer teaching, children helping other children to learn.

A Need to Individualize

The realization that children can be very effective in helping other children to learn has come at a time when educators are acknowledging that individualization of instruction is both essential and costly. It is becoming increasingly clear that one teacher cannot adequately manage the learning of some thirty diverse individuals in a class unless she has some assistance. More remarkable than the rapid growth of peer teaching programs is the fact that this valuable source has not been tapped sooner. Peer teaching is an eminently practical way of getting far more individualized instruction without the commitment of additional professional teaching personnel. Where children help other children to learn, a classroom has thirty-one potential teachers and thirty-one potential learners. On the basic economic level, then, peer teaching makes sense. But it has far richer potential than that.

What the Theorists Say

Psychologists tell us that the best way to learn something is to teach it to someone else. In the process of teaching, we review the material and reinforce our own learning. In report after report of peer teaching programs, the point is made that while the children who are tutored make significant gains in learning, it is the tutors themselves who benefit most. When a peer assumes a teaching task, he is in a real situation which demands of him that he organize and express his thoughts in such a way that one of his peers can follow and understand him. He gets immediate feedback from the one he is tutoring, and if he has not been clear, he must find new words, new examples to convey his meaning.

Sociologists, too, find ample theoretical ground to explain the success of peer teaching. They point out the desire and need of youth today to be useful and helpful. In elementary, secondary, and college classrooms, teachers are busy devising ways in which young people can engage in meaningful activities which are genuinely of help to others. Some teachers are even learning to let the children themselves discover the work which needs to be done and find the means of taking on some aspect of it.

In other words what they are doing is allowing for tribal learning--the idea of each one teach one--to take its natural course.

And it seems that there is real need for and a logical application for this idea in second language classes.

First of all, because of the nature of language and the way it is learned, language is speech and speech is communication. And just as first language was learned--because of a need to communicate--we need to provide situations in second language learning that create that need. And just as first language is learned from many others, we need to provide the opportunities in classrooms for students to teach and learn from each other, and from each other's work.

And being very practical, we need this type of classroom organization because of economics. With small class size and dwindling enrollments, we need to provide heterogeneous classes that are multi-leveled in terms of language competency. We are sometimes forced to do so--it may turn out to be a blessing in disguise. It is a trite over-used term, but we need to bring relevance--in the form of natural language learning--to second language learning.

Today's educational movement is toward humanism, relevance and individualization. And when you stop and think about natural language learning, and think of language as communication between people in the real world, you realize that is what second language learning and second language teaching are all about.